

Language policy in Bosnia and Herzegovina and its ethno-linguistic context: do languages cause inter-ethnic tension in Bosnia and Herzegovina?

Abstract:

After the collapse of Yugoslavia in 1991, the new independent state of Bosnia and Herzegovina was inundated by a horrible ethnic conflict, which led to inhumane violence and mass killings that ended with genocide. The Bosnian war resulted in the death of about 100,000 people, over half of whom were Bosnians. Two decades later, the violence has stopped, but the conflict in Bosnia has not yet come to an end; hasty social segregation, undertaken as a result of the 1995 Dayton Accords, which intended an immediate stopping of the violence, is still in force. The current distribution of population and languages is evidence of this segregation. Two different ethnic minorities live in two Bosnian political units, the Srpska Republic and the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina: Serbs in the first and Bosnians in the second. In these circumstances, which are very sensitive, the government was recently worried that the ordinary publication of statistical data on ethnic groups might lead to violence. The languages representing these two groups are important indicators of social presence and power. Signboards in the main streets of the capital cities of both countries (Sarajevo in the Federation and Banja Luka in Serbian Republic) were scrupulously photographed for the purpose of assessing the presence of Serbians and Bosnians. The presence of the English language in Bosnia was also documented. An assumption was made that the linguistic majority would correspond to the ethnic majority in both main streets, and that English would be used in advertising. The number of photos in which each language was used was calculated to determine the frequency and the situations in which the languages are commonly used. An analysis of these results showed that English is the second most used language in both streets after Bosnian, while comparatively little presence of the Serbian language in both streets showed that the language environment in Bosnia does not facilitate peace and making peace.

Keywords: Bosnia and Herzegovina; Linguistic landscape; Language policy; Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian.